Why Tap?
Tap dancer and choreographer Michelle Dorrance is shattering the conventions of her art form through bold new movement, music, and technology. Dorrance believes that tap is a uniquely American art form like jazz, worthy of acceptance in the academy and on the concert stage. At the same time, Dorrance is connected to tap’s history and origins in the devastating conditions of slavery. “It is born of some of the most oppressed people in our country and culture has known and...finds its way to joy.”

Today, most of our awareness of tap comes from movies and musicals, leading some to dismiss it as less artistically potent than other forms of modern dance. Dorrance’s approach to choreography involves complex movements and frequent collaborations with musicians, other choreographers, and audio engineers. Upon awarding Dorrance a 2015 “Genius Grant,” the MacArthur Foundation wrote, “Dorrance maintains the essential layering of rhythms in tap but choreographs ensemble works that engage the entire body: dancers swoop, bend, leap, and twist with dramatic expression that is at once musical and visual.”

Tap dancers consider themselves to be musicians as well as dancers. “To be able to be a dancer and a musician at the same time, there’s nothing like it,” says Dorrance. “There’s something organic in your biorhythms, your heartbeat. And to be able to demonstrate that inside of a moving form is phenomenal.”

Connect to the Performance
Watch an excerpt of Dorrance’s piece “The Blues Project” featuring musicians Toshi Reagon and BIGLovely.

Their first piece, ETM: Double Down, also features live musicians. Watch this video to see ETM in action.

Watch this video to learn more about Michelle Dorrance’s creative process.
Getting to know Michelle Dorrance
In this video from the MacArthur Foundation, Michelle Dorrance discusses her love of dance, the origins of tap, and her hopes for the future of the art form.

Visit Dorrance Dance.

Tap Dance History and Culture

Origins of Tap Dance
Tap dance originated in the United States in the early 19th century at the crossroads of African and Irish American dance forms. When slave owners took away traditional African percussion instruments, slaves turned to percussive dancing to express themselves and retain their cultural identities. These styles of dance connected with clog dancing from the British Isles, creating a unique form of movement and rhythm. Early tap shoes had wooden soles, sometimes with pennies attached to the heel and toe. Tap gained popularity after the Civil War as part of traveling minstrel shows, where white and black performers wore blackface and belittled black people by portraying them as lazy, dumb, and comical.

The Evolution of Tap
20th Century Tap
Tap was an important feature of popular Vaudeville variety shows of the early 20th century and a major part of the rich creative output of the Harlem Renaissance. Tap dancers began collaborating with jazz musicians, incorporating improvisation and complex syncopated rhythms into their movement. The modern tap shoe, featuring metal plates (called “taps”) on the heel and toe, also came into widespread use at this time. Although Vaudeville and Broadway brought performance opportunities to African-American dancers, racism was still pervasive: white and black dancers typically performed separately and for segregated audiences. Tap’s popularity declined in the second half of the century, but was reinvigorated in the 1980s through Broadway shows like 42nd Street and The Tap Dance Kid.

Tap in Hollywood
From the 1930s to the 1950s, tap dance sequences became a staple of movies and television. Tap stars included Shirley Temple, who began her career as a tap dancer, and Gene Kelly, who introduced a balletic style of tap. Fred Astaire, famous for combining tap with ballroom dance, insisted that his dance scenes be captured with a single take and wide camera angle. This style of cinematography became the norm for tap dancing in movies and television for decades.

Tap Today
Tap continues to be an important part of American vernacular dance. Modern tap dancers are informed by the traditions, movements, and styles of their predecessors while continuing to push the limits of their art form. Tap is also gaining long-deserved recognition on the concert stage, at major dance festivals, and in university classrooms.
The Masters of Tap Dance

**Master Juba (ca. 1825 – ca. 1852)** was one of the only early black tap dancers to tour with a white minstrel group and one of the first to perform for white audiences. Master Juba offered a fast and technically brilliant dance style blending European and African dance forms.

**Bill “Bojangles” Robinson (1888 – 1949)** began dancing in minstrel shows and was one of the first African-American dancers to perform without blackface. He adapted to the changing tastes of the era, moving on to vaudeville, Broadway, Hollywood Radio programs, and television. Robinson’s most popular routine involved dancing up and down a staircase with complex tap rhythms on each step. A Richmond, VA native, you can see a tribute statue of him in Jackson Ward in downtown Richmond at the intersection of Old Brook Road, West Leigh, and Price streets.

**Peg Leg Bates (1907-98)** taught himself to dance with after losing a leg in a cotton gin accident as a child. He danced in vaudeville, on film, and was a frequent guest on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. Bates also frequently performed for others with physical disabilities.

**Jeni Le Gon** (1916-2012) was the first black woman to dance with Fred Astaire on screen and later became an important tap pedagogue.

**The Nicholas Brothers**
Fayard (1914-2006) and Howard (1921-2000) Nicholas had a film and television tap career spanning more than 70 years. Trained in ballet by George Balanchine, the brothers introduced an athletic, virtuosic style made famous by their performance in the 1943 film *Stormy Weather*.

**Gregory Hines** (1946-2003) introduced a higher complexity of the improvisation of steps, sounds, rhythms. Hines’s dances were rhythmically involved and often strayed from traditional rhythmic meters.

**Savion Glover** (b. 1973) is best known for starring in the Broadway hit *The Tap Dance Kid*. Glover mixes classic moves like those of his teacher Gregory Hines with his own contemporary style. He has won several Tony awards for his Broadway choreography.
Elements of Dance
There are five recognized elements of dance and these can be helpful guides in watching or thinking about dance.

**Body** refers to the awareness of specific body parts and how they can be moved in isolation or combination.

**Action** refers to locomotor and non-locomotor movement. Locomotor action includes movement that travels through space such as walking, running, jumping, and leaping. Non-locomotor movement is when you move body parts while the main part of the body stays planted in one space, such as swaying, shaking, stretching, and twisting.

**Energy** refers to the force applied to dance to accentuate the weight, attack, strength, and flow of a dancer’s movements.

**Space** refers to the space the dancer’s body moves through, the shapes the body makes, the direction of the movements, and the shapes, levels, and movement patterns of a group of dancers.

**Time** is applied to both a musical and dance element. It can include rhythm (pulse, beat), speed (tempo), duration (fast/slow, short/long), and phrases (patterns and combinations).

**Tap Dance Terminology**
Tap dancers are comprised of different combinations of basic moves. Read about some of these building blocks and try them out for yourself.

**Toe:** Strike the floor with the toe

**Heel:** Strike the floor with the heel

**Heel Toe:** Strike the floor with the heel, immediately followed by a strike of the toe

**Brush:** While standing on one leg, sweep the other leg across the floor (known as a “spank” when the free leg sweeps backwards)

**Scuff:** Similar to a brush, but hitting the floor with the heel instead of sweeping the shoe.

**Shuffle:** The combination of two brushes

**Flap heel:** A brush with toe to the heel at the end of the brush motion

**Ball change:** A transfer of weight from the front foot to the ball of the back foot.
Understanding Dance
Discussion: In class, conduct a discussion around these questions:

- What is dance?
- When do you dance?
- How does it make you feel?
- Does anyone in your family like to dance?
- Does anyone you know not like to dance? Why?
- Do you associate dancing with any specific gender? Why?
- What are the most popular dance styles in your school, community, and country?
- Can you demonstrate these?
- Why is it that all cultures dance?
- Is dance valued in your community?
- Does engaging in dance contribute to a person’s sense of identity?
- What and how might dance tell us something about how people relate to the environment and each other?
- What kinds of training do you think professional dancers require and for how long?
- What are some popular American TV shows that focus on dance? What do they tell us about dance?

Adapted from UMS – University Musical Society - Learning Guide and White Bird Presents Study Guide